

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

A TOUGH AUDIENCE

The prophet Isaiah has a tough job. He's been called to preach hope in the midst of despair. He's been called to tell the exiles in Babylon that God is on the way to save them.

But when you've spent many years in captivity it's hard to believe in the salvation of God. You become bitter and angry. Sometimes you even attack the messenger who brings good news.

Isaiah preaches a great sermon. He uses powerful images to talk about the might and glory of the One who created the heavens and the earth.

But, Isaiah has a tough audience. The exiles ask, "If God is so powerful, why am I so miserable? If we are God's chosen people, why are we in exile? Where is God in our hour of need?"

When we find ourselves in exile, we too have a hard time hearing the gospel. We too can be a tough audience for even the best preacher when things are not going so well in our life.

When I am trying to help a person or a congregation struggling with some issue, I always try to place that struggle in the context of God's promises and God's grace. But, sometimes they give me this look, and I just know what they are thinking.

"Why is this guy talking about the Bible? Doesn't he know that we have real problems?"

I understand. When trouble comes it's hard to think about the promises of God. In fact we are tempted to even doubt the existence of God or that God cares about us.

Like those who were held captive by the Babylonians long ago we might wonder out loud, "Has God lost track of us? Doesn't God hear our pleas?"

LOOK UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

You can't give a captive people easy answers. There are no easy answers when life comes apart at the seams.

But, the prophet does have a suggestion.

According to Isaiah the key is to look up instead of about. We should focus our minds and hearts on the power and promises of God. We should meditate upon the wonders of creation.

Isaiah says, “Think about it. The Spirit of the Living God, the same Spirit that breathed life into creation can breathe life into us when we are down and out. We need to put our little lives in a larger perspective.”

What about you? What do you do when life comes apart at the seams? Do you look up instead of about? Do you focus on the promises of God and the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus?

Or is your mind stuck in the mud of the mundane, the problem of the moment?

If we always focus on what is right in front of us instead of looking for what is above and beyond us, we will always be earthbound. We will major in minors, and it will increase our suffering.

A MESSAGE OF COMFORT

The point of Isaiah’s sermon is to do just the opposite. He wants to decrease his people’s suffering. That’s the job that God has given him, to bring comfort and hope in a time of great tragedy.

Isaiah chapter 40 begins opens with this word of comfort. The prophet hears God say, “Comfort, O Comfort my people.”

And then Isaiah is given a vision of that salvation. God makes a road in the wilderness. The time of suffering is over. The people of God are on their way back home.

We often talk about that passage during the season of Advent and Christmas. Just as God came in Christ the first time so God is going to intervene in the lives of God’s people once more. God, the Great Shepherd is going to gather His people together.

Listen to the poetic way that the prophet puts it in Isaiah 40:11,

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead the mother sheep.”

But, the story that brings so much warmth and hope during Advent and Christmas is harder to believe in January and February. It’s easy to believe in the salvation of God when things are going well, when everyone is filled with good will and hope.

On the other hand, a promise of salvation seems like cold comfort when you are in exile, your temple is in ruins, your children are learning the language of the oppressors and fewer and fewer people even care about the Promised Land any more.

That, of course was the situation when Isaiah tried to comfort God's people. Somehow the prophet had to shift their focus. Somehow the prophet had to help his people remember that they were God's chosen people. Their story was not finished. God had a job for them to do.

REMEMBER THE WORD

Isaiah begins his sermon by reminding the people of God's Word, the stories of faith and promise. The prophet asks rhetorically, "Have you not heard? Have you not seen? Has it not been told to you from the beginning?"

This was not the first time God's people had been in captivity. The Passover Meal reminded them every year that had God delivered them from captivity when they were slaves in Egypt. And though they wandered in the wilderness for a while before they made it to the Promised Land, in the end God did give them a home.

They all knew this story. They had heard it from the very beginning. But, they had forgotten that the story was not just about what God did way back when. It was also a story about what God was going to do here and now.

That's what Isaiah was telling them. They needed to hear that story in a new way. The Word of God has power. The Word of God has eternal power. The Word of God not only changes things there and then. The Word of God also changes things here and now.

We see examples of this down through the ages. For example, the slaves in this country loved the story of God delivering the Israelites from the Egyptians. Many of the spirituals refer to the Exodus.

Why was this story so important to them? It was important because in this story they heard a promise of deliverance not only for people who lived long ago but also hope for their own deliverance. And I think that the hope they derived from this story gave them courage and hope and eventually led to the downfall of slavery.

When you hear God's word of deliverance, things change. The power of God's word is not diminished by time and space.

Isaiah reminds his people of that with his rhetorical questions. Have you not heard? Have you not seen? Don't you remember the stories that have drawn us together from the very beginning?

A REALLY BIG GOD

And then Isaiah takes his audience back to the very beginning of that story, the story of creation. Isaiah asks the exiles to think about who they are in comparison to the Creator of everything.

He imagines God sitting above the “circle of the earth” and what are the people like in comparison to God? They are like “grasshoppers” or as Peterson translates it “ants.”

Now don’t misunderstand. The prophet is not saying that we are insignificant in God’s eyes.

But, we need to remember. “God’s ways are not our ways”. God is so far above and beyond us that we are indeed like ants or grasshopper in comparison. In fact, given what we know about the size and scope of the universe today calling us grasshoppers or ants is making us look larger than we really are!

For believers meditating upon the infinite power and glory of the Creator is an aid to faith and a source of comfort. For those who set themselves up to be “lord” on this earth the infinite power and glory of the Creator is not such good news. The grasshopper, ant comparison is anathema to those who want to be king.

Isaiah knew this, and he wanted to rub it in.

He said, “Those guys who think they’re in charge are delusional. Even the greatest princes and the most powerful rulers are like sickly plants with shallow roots.

In comparison to the might and glory of God all of them are here one day and gone the next. The wind blows them away and they are nothing more than stubble.

That’s a pretty bold way to describe those that were in charge. Like many rulers today those rulers maintained their power through military might and threats. And when Isaiah preached his message God’s people found themselves under the terrible influence of the most powerful nation in the ancient world, the mighty Babylonians.

But, compared to the power of God these rulers were not even up to grasshopper standards. They were dried up stubble. Their days were numbered.

Compare this attitude with the values of our world today. We are fascinated with the lives of those who are wealthy and powerful.

But, this passage teaches us that God is not interested in those who gain power and influence on the backs of others.

God is interested in lifting up those that are downtrodden. For a people in exile this is indeed a word of comfort and hope.

THE HEAVENS ARE TELLING

And then Isaiah uses an example that we can see no matter where we are and what’s going on in our life. In the spirit of the Psalmist who wrote that the heavens are telling the glory of God, Isaiah encourages these exiles to look to the heavens for comfort.

The stars of the night sky were indeed a source of wonder and mystery for the ancient peoples. Isaiah says, "Look up. The one who made the heavenly bodies is the same one who promises to deliver you. Is anything too hard for the creator of all that is."

Of course we know much more about the heavens now than they knew then. But, our knowledge has not decreased the sense of wonder. On the contrary, the wonder is increased by our knowledge.

We know that some of the lights in the night sky may have started their journey through space thousands of years ago. Powerful telescopes can see almost back to the start of time. The more we know; the more we can truly say with the Psalmist that the heavens are indeed telling the glory of God.

This is the God who is mighty in power and strength. This is the God who promises to redeem His people. His knowledge and influence are all pervasive.

THE PROBLEM OF A TOO SMALL GOD

God is indeed an awesome God. And it is important that we meditate upon the might and power of God.

If we try to cut God down to a size that we can manage, we are indeed foolish.

Earlier in this chapter Isaiah talks about those who make small gods crafted out of silver and gold and wood. But, those little gods will fall at the first sign of trouble. They are idols. (Isaiah 40:18-20)

Let the economy take a down turn and our silver and gold idols will also totter and fall. Our concept of God is still too small. We seek salvation in all the wrong places.

Like the exiles of old we too have a desperate need to look up instead of about. If our "god" is too small we will forfeit the comfort and hope that is rightly ours.

GOD LIFTS US UP

But, if we meditate upon this all powerful, all knowing God then we are prepared to receive a wonderful truth. This Creator God, this Sovereign Lord who never gets tired has promised to give us strength in our time of need.

When we are wiped out by life, when we are beaten down, this God promises to lift us up.

We may not be in exile in another land, but each day I come to appreciate more and more how all of us in one way or another have our own personal exiles. It may be a family problem. It may be illness. It may be the pain of regret. It may be sorrow.

The list goes on and on. But, the upshot is this. We are worn out by it all, young and old alike. There is a strong pull to just give in and give up.

But, the prophet encourages us to wait for the Lord that is we continuously trust in God. We place our lives in God's strong hands.

We may be exhausted by life, but the Creator does not grow weary. And the Creator of all that is can lift us up.

The Creator can take us ants, us grasshoppers and transform us into eagles. The Spirit of the living God can be the wind beneath our wings.

The Spirit of the living God can give us the strength to keep on running the race that God has set out before us. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

DON'T LOSE HEART

Christian brothers and sisters don't lose heart. We look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. We look to Jesus who endured the cross and yet now sits at the throne of God in glory.

And the Bible tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is just a down payment on a salvation that comes to the whole world.

As He was raised one day we will be raised as well. The Bible tells us that the present suffering does not hold a candle to the glory that we will inherit in the age to come.

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not talking just about the future. I'm talking about an eternal hope that changes things today. I'm talking about an eternal promise that will give us the strength to do God's will today.

Communion reminds us of a great truth. The story of God's salvation does not end with body broken and blood shed. The story ends with a God who overrules evil and creates a new heaven and new earth.

And that's the promise God wants us to hold in our heart.

The Creator of the universe loves you and promises to lift you up on the wings of hope. May the power of that Spirit help us soar today.

Amen.